

Anti-imperialism in Panama

VICTORY THROUGH AUTO REGISTRATION

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"The Panamanian people, with their patriotic government as the vanguard, have been valiantly struggling against US imperialist economic and political aggression and hegemony." This statement typifies the rancid rhetoric that Panamanians hear from the men who wield or symbolize the power in their country, primarily General Manuel Noriega, chief of the Panama Defense Forces (PDF), and Manuel Solis Palma, the head of government. I say "head of government," because, while the Panamanian Government refers to "President" Solis Palma, the US Government recognizes him as "Minister in Charge of the Presidency."

A Devious Plan

The Panamanian Government has stressed the importance of defeating "US imperialism" and its Panamanian "agents." It says these "bad Panamanians" are from the upper class and have "Caucasian tendencies." That is the government's way of implying to the majority of the population that the rich whites are out to exploit everyone else. It does not help matters when Solis Palma publicly proclaims, "We are all *chombos* (derogatory slang for blacks), when dealing with the *rabiblanco* ("white asses")."

Among other things, the government claims that the rich Panamanian "exploiters" and the "imperialists" are the only ones who can afford cars. As a result, it has devised a system of new automobile registration rules to force its enemies to capitulate by extorting large financial sums from them to help balance the national debt and by occupying so much of their daily schedules that they will not have any time left to conspire against national interests.

Open Warfare

Before the implementation of this system, all I had to do to register my car was to have it inspected at the PDF Inspection Station and then pick up the license plate at another location. Now that I am a target of the government, however, registration has taken on the aspects of an international conflict.

First, I had to obtain a mechanical inspection from an "authorized garage," one of about 10 garages owned by or linked with the PDF-government authorities. If the vehicle passes, a Mechanical Certification [MechCert] is issued. If you are a US citizen or look like someone who would support the opposition, your vehicle will not pass. In fact, your vehicle will need a wheel alignment (Translation: "Because you do not support Noriega, you will pay some money.") Other vehicle "faults" may be discovered; this depends on how busy the garage is and how wealthy or lucky you are.

So I showed up at an authorized garage with my Ford station wagon and my wallet stuffed with green souvenir portraits of US presidents. I had to drive my car to a yellow line and shine the headlights at a large board leaning against a wall. The two headlight beams landed 6 inches to the left of two small Xs drawn on the board. "Your headlights need adjustment," the attendant told me. To save him the trouble, I backed my car up and then drove back to the yellow line, moving the wheels about 6 inches to the right as I did so. Bulls-eye! The beams and

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Xs matched. "Perfecto," I exclaimed. The attendant walked over to the board and slid it about 6 inches to the right. "Headlight adjustment," he repeated.

The attendant gave a quick glance under the car and announced, "What bad luck, it looks like you need a wheel alignment."

I asked, "Can I just give you the money for it, and we can pretend you did the work?"

The attendant pointed to some mechanical contraption, shook his head, and grinned at me in a certain way that said, "Because you do not support Noriega, you will not only pay money, you will also spend most of your day here."

So I wasted most of my money and my day there before I was blessed with the MechCert.

Next, I took the MechCert to a branch of the government-owned Banco Nacional, where I had to pay \$2.10 for a Receipt of Payment [RecPay]. Each teller uses whatever delaying tactics are necessary to comply with the master plan of bureaucratic warfare. I launched a surprise attack, however, by sending my 5-year-old son, who speaks little Spanish, to present the MechCert and fee to the cashier. The cashier, face to face with my secret weapon, had no choice but to surrender the RecPay to my son, who successfully demanded some ice cream as the price for his participation.

More Obstacles

I then took the MechCert and the RecPay to the PDF Inspection Station, where PDF officials had to verify the documents and the car before issuing the Inspection Decal [InspecDec].

There is only one inspection station to handle about 1 million cars, all of which happened to show up when I did. The cars, five lines deep and stretching the length of an airport runway—the inspection station actually was an airport in the past—sizzled in the tropical sun and took many hours to reach the first checkpoint, where I saw drivers bolting from their cars and rushing to a row of windows. Naturally, I did the same. After another long wait, I reached the keeper of Window No. 4. I handed over about 5 pounds of paperwork; in addition to the MechCert and RecPay, I had been warned to offer for sacrifice my driver's license, car insurance certificate, and proof of vehicle ownership. On my own initiative, I also brought along my birth certificate, proof of yellow fever vaccinations, and a copy of my college transcript.

When the windowkeeper decided my papers were in order, and I use that term loosely, she handed the InspecDec to a worker who asked me to show him my car. When we arrived at the Ford, the man prepared to apply the decal to the window, but he kept wiping his brow with his sleeve and saying things like, "Man, am I thirsty!" Because the heat had addled my brain, it took me longer than usual to get the not-so-subtle hint. I gave him a dollar to buy a cold drink, even though the nearest cold drink must have been miles away.

I was then eligible to receive my Municipal Tax Clearance Certificate [MTCC], which is needed to obtain a license plate. I went to a well-named place called Diablo Heights, where I waited in a line, handed over my growing pile of papers, waited some more, paid my 25-cent fee, signed a form, waited some more, and then received the MTCC. Through a dreadful miscalculation by the government, the license plate office was located in the same building as the MTCC office, thus eliminating an extra trip. So I waited in another line, handed over my paper-filled briefcase, waited some more, paid my \$30 fee, signed a form, waited again, and finally received the license plate.

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I then needed a Vehicle Registration Card [VRC], which required returning to the PDF Inspection Station with my file cabinet of documents and \$1.50. I returned to the runway, and, in the words of Yogi Berra, "It was like *deja vu* all over again."

The good news was that I finally had my car fully documented. The bad news is that it took so long that it is almost time to go through the process again for the following year.

"Pineapple Face" Prevails

Meanwhile, the crisis in Panama continues. Noriega, who is not above ordering forced confessions or forced wheel alignments, still has the upper hand, primarily because he garners support by distributing free beer and days off from work. The opposition retaliates in part with insulting hand gestures and severe sarcasm. It also resorts to name-calling. For example, acne-scarred Noriega is "Pineapple Face," Solis Palma is "Solis Dead-Palm Leaf," and Noriega's favorite patriotic slogan, "Not one step backward", is converted into "No more frogs!"

Noriega has responded by offering quasi-supporters two priceless objects, an inspection decal with matching license plate.

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